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ABSTRACT

The paper focuses on the linguistic behavior of Negro children concentrated in communities where a non-standard form of English is the accepted currency. Such children are verbal, possess a language fully developed to serve the needs of their "world," and think effectively enough to survive in a sometimes hostile environment. Certain basic assumptions must be made in order to communicate with such group: for example, that in non-standard English, time, whether critical or not, is only optionally expressed in the verb if expressed elsewhere in the sentence or indicated by the context. Thus, from the linguist's point of view, the language behavior of this population is highly predictable, and what appears to be occasional divergences from the standard are really parts of a pattern, which every teacher must understand if efficient teaching and learning is to take place in the classroom. This can be said for other minority groups as well, with the modifications made necessary by contrastive analyses of the specific groups' native language and English. (EM)

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AMERICAN EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH ASSOCIATION ANNUAL MEETING, 1968

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The title of this paper is, I fear, too ambitious for a twelve minute presentation. It is simply not possible, within that time limit, to speak categorically on both the language and the learning styles of the many and diverse minority group children in the United States. I shall therefore limit my remarks to a discussion of the aspect of behavior and the minority group with whom I have done most research. I refer, of course, to the linguistic behavior of Negro children concentrated in communities where a non-standard form of English is the accepted currency.

We do not have to go very far in our research to find statements of the kind made by Alexander Frazier in a VSOE research proposal for improving the language skills of children with poor backgrounds: "One learns with his native language many ways of dealing with experiences that are culturally defined...The young child learns to think with whatever language he learns from those around him...Children brought up in a disadvantaged or different group may be more handicapped than other children by having less language to think with in approaching school-sponsored experiences..." and then, on the other hand, "A child may be able to make highly differentiated verbal responses to some aspects of his experience that are highly valued by his family (such as types of crops, values of different fertilizers, and degrees of kinship) but may lack the framework for thinking and the words to use in

dealing with more remote or 'less important' matters."

What does this mean for the disadvantaged, linguistically different Negro child? It certainly means, for one thing, that we ought to revise or re-examine our notions as to whether he is verbal or not, as to whether he thinks or not, indeed, as to whether or not he has language in any real sense. I propose that he is verbal, that he has a language fully developed to serve the needs of his "world" and that he thinks, and thinks effectively enough to assure his survival in a not altogether friendly world. True, his world is a very concrete one, with very little excursions into abstractions, and that if the exercise of thinking were to be limited to purely abstract manipulation, he would be found to be at a decided disadvantage, but this, I maintain, would be a very restricted view of the process of thinking, and we are therefore compelled to reject the notion that these children do not think.

Let me move, however, from the purely conceptual to the language style of this group as seen by the linguist. This is, as you will see, style in a different sense from that usually taken by the psychologist or the rhetorician. I am referring here to the syntactic organization of the universe as reflected in the language, and the consequences of such organization in the performance of routine classroom tasks. I shall present these in the form of certain basic assumptions which can be made in communicating with the group, bearing in mind that we may not find a single speaker who displays every single one of these features, but that, on the contrary, each feature will be represented in the population.

Ironically enough, my first assumption has to do with time. I have not investigated whether or not there is any correlation

between the fact that time information is not obligatorily carried by the verb in the so-called Negro dialect, and the fact that this group is generally believed to have a different concept of time from the majority culture. By obligatorily carried time I mean the fact that one can always tell by the form of a verb or verb phrase whether the event involved has occurred, is occurring, or is likely or about to occur. Suffice it to say that in non-standard English, time, whether critical or not, is only optionally expressed in the verb if expressed elsewhere in the sentence or indicated by the context. Thus sentences like "he be there now," "he be there soon," or "he be there yesterday," must rely for the time information on the words "now," "soon," and "yesterday," a form of behavior quite alien to the standard speaker whose style requires a kind of back-up system in the redundantly marked verb forms "is" in "he is there now;" "will be" in "he will be there soon;" and "was" in "he was there yesterday."

My choice of sentences containing "be" to illustrate the lack of time information in verbs was deliberate, and leads directly to my second assumption. The auxiliary verb, "be," so essential in the formulation of abstract concepts in standard English, is virtually non-existent in the language of some members of this community, and when it does appear, is manifested in forms which tend to be frozen or not inflected in the same way as in the dominant culture. Thus we will find speakers who omit this auxiliary in every single type of English sentence in which it would normally appear. It may be omitted before noun phrases in equative sentences: "she my sister" or "he a preacher;" before adjectives or past participles in predicative statements: "my book red" or "my book lost;"

before adverb or adverb phrases in locational sentences: "I here teacher" or "John over there;" in durative sentences: "he running away" or "you looking sick." Where the auxiliary "be" is not omitted altogether, it may assume one and only one of its many standard shapes. Thus some Negro children use the form "be" itself to express habitual aspect, that is, for repeated action or permanent states, as opposed to the fact of the moment in which "be" is omitted. I must point out that in this the dialect is actually richer than the standard. Standard English says "he is in the library" or "most of the time he is in the library," while the dialect speaker shifts between "he be in the library" and "most of the time he be in the library." The teacher who can detect these correspondences is well on the way to understandings which will lead to effective learning experiences for the child. Let me proceed, however.

We are all familiar, of course, with the pervasiveness of "is" in such contexts as "I is coming," "we is the only one...," "you is not going," "they is here," or "the books is on the desk." This is linked more closely with the next assumption, on which I shall touch only briefly. This is the fact that not only "be," but indeed all verbs tend to be immune from the inflectional markers which signal person and number in the language of standard speakers. Thus we may have, on the one hand, speakers who attach the form "see" to every single pronoun in the language, yielding the correct "I see," "we see," "you see," and "they see," but the incorrect (at least so we think) "he see" and "the boy see," and, on the other hand, "sees" speakers who appear to be murdering the language at every turn with their "I sees," "we sees," "you sees," and "they sees," and the occasionally correct "he sees," and "the boy sees." The

situation is often further complicated, however, by free variation, so that some speakers shift constantly between "see" and "sees," with no apparent logic in their behavior.

Lest I seem to be belaboring the verb--(I am almost tempted to indulge in a horrid pun and say, lest I seem to be belaboring the verbal behavior of these children), I will turn now to those aspects of the style which are demonstrated in the noun--the nominal behavior, if I may extend the figure. Our next assumption would be that the language does not display any overt marker of possession if the possessor precedes the thing possessed. Thus "John old man house" must do service for "John's old man's house," not because the youngster does not have the concept of possessive so strongly marked by the so-called apostophe "s" in the standard, but because possession is expressed in quite another way in his language. For him the mere position or juxtaposition of the two forms is enough to indicate that the one is possessor and the other the possessed. It makes possible syntactic arrangements which would be impossible for the standard speaker, and which may actually signify a different ordering of the world of experience. Let us take the child, for instance, who on joining in a game expresses strong reluctance against being put on "Nick and them side," i.e. he does not want to join the side of Nick and his cronies. There are two problems, here, but they serve to balance each other out. On the one hand, his language lacks the alternative construction to which English would have to resort in cases where the possessor is a phrase such as "Nick and his bunch," that is, the construction introduced by the preposition "of," or if need be "with." On the other hand, it compensates not only with an "and them" which some-

how or other pluralizes "Nick," but it goes further and makes the entire phrase possessive by simply preposing it to "side," yielding "Nick and them side."

The parsimony characteristic of the Negro dialects manifests itself further in what I present as the next assumption, namely that if the cardinal number is expressed in a noun phrase, then the noun itself need not carry the redundant plural marker, and indeed rarely does. Thus we may get "ten ball" or "three hat." This does not mean, however, that the concept of plural is lacking. On the contrary, we know that it is meaningful for the groups because the aberrant forms like "desses" for "desks," "mens" for "men," and "wasses" or "wapses" for "wasps" are clearly attempts at pluralizing, and had a possessive rather than the cardinal number preceded, we would get "my balls" and not "my ball" for more than one. Indeed, the cardinal number is not alone in playing the role of carrier of the plural concept. Quantitatives like "some" in "some books," or demonstratives like "those" in "those boys" are also markers of plural, so that we need not be surprised to encounter "some book" or "them boy" in which "some" and "them" are clearly plural, requiring no reinforcement from an -s suffix in the noun.

Before I end this catalogue of features which mark the syntactic style of this population, I should like to comment on two sequential types: the existential sentence normally introduced by "there" in the standard, "there are six chairs in the room," and general sentence construction, normally consisting of subject and predicate. For many of these children, the existential "there" is replaced by "it," as in "it is five of us in the room." General

sentence construction features what is usually termed a double subject, but which is actually a sentence type which is found in other languages, the topic/comment sentence type. That is, the sentence is constructed by first announcing the topic, and then a comment is made about this topic, the comment usually featuring a pronoun in its subject slot. Thus, "my brother, he go to college" would be exactly equivalent to the standard "my brother goes to college," and "the chicken, it got out of the coop" would express "the chicken got out of the coop."

In giving the foregoing concrete examples, I have been attempting to show that from the point of view of the linguist, the language behavior of this population is highly predictable, and that what appears to be occasional divergences from the standard are really parts of a pattern, which every teacher must understand if efficient teaching and learning is to take place in the classroom. There are obviously two sides to the question. While the youngster needs to become comfortable in the use of the language necessary for his school-appointed tasks, this goal can never be achieved unless the teacher understands the nature of the behavior he is attempting to change and is willing to assist the child over the countless hurdles confronting him. The change which must be effected is not simply a reorganization of the surface language, but also a reorganization of the world of experience which he brings to the classroom. It is, in one sense, a psychological task, not as simple as we have been inclined to view it, for our approach to the problem and the materials and methods with which we try to stimulate learning in the children depends in large measure on a scientific and enlightened understanding of what bilingualism means, and of

the sociology and psychology of second language learning.

A good deal of what I have said for the Negro child could be said for other minority groups as well, with the modifications made necessary by contrastive analyses of the specific groups' native language and English. Where two minority groups are in close interaction with each other, as in the ghettoes of New York City, Puerto Rican children learn much of their English from their Negro peers, and researchers are tempted to combine both groups and examine their language under the label of "the language of the disadvantaged." Thus William Labov has reported on both Negro and Puerto Rican children in New York City in a single research project directed to reading remediation in city schools, and Reuben Gross, in his study of the relation between dialect, auditory discrimination, and reading, also mixed his Negro and Puerto Rican populations. However, other studies are under way which indicate that the groups should be studied separately, and taking into consideration, at the same time, the effects of interaction between them. The sociolinguistic study of bilingualism being conducted on Spanish-speaking communities in New York City by Joshua Fishman and staff is likely to be one giant step in this direction. So too is Labov's more recent study of Negro gangs in Harlem and William Stewart's urban dialect study in Washington, D.C. Susan Sardy, in a soon to be completed Yeshiva University doctoral dissertation, has taken Gross' study a step further and isolated auditory discrimination styles of Negro, Puerto Rican, and poor whites in New York City public schools. But the research is only in its initial stage, and if we linguists cannot say very much that is definitive at this date, we crave your indulgence, for ours is an even younger discipline than the psychologists'.

The initial success of one project at Keaukaha School in Hilo, Hawaii, however, encourages us to feel that we may be on the road to some real insights in language and the learning of school-directed tasks where minority group populations are concerned.